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ABSTRACT

A 2-year study examined the leisure reading of 60 13- to 15-year-old students in England. Each subject was interviewed once a term for five terms, and was asked to keep a "reading diary" containing information about books read. Results indicated that young people do read, probably more than teachers think. Specific findings showed that (1) although the amount of reading tended to decline over time, this pattern was not invariable; (2) reading habits were affected by pressure of examinations and homework, summer holidays, other leisure activities, family commitments, and difficulty finding suitable books; (3) magazine reading was prevalent and declined less than book reading; (4) most of the books read were adult books and more than half the books had some link with the mass media; (5) buying, borrowing from the public library, and borrowing from friends and family were the three main sources of books; and (6) books were chosen because of author, recommendation, influence of mass media, type, or attractiveness of cover. These results suggest that teachers should be more concerned with quality of response than quality of the literature. Teacher influence is also a crucial factor in getting students to read. (JL)

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YOUNG PEOPLE'S READING: A STUDY OF THE LEISURE READING OF 13-15 YEAR OLDS

Pauline Heather

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Young People's Reading: A Study of the Leisure Reading of 13-15 year olds

Part of the motivation for this study came from a recommendation at the end of Whitehead's study, 'Children and their books' which says:

> 'What is needed now is a longitudinal study of a much smaller number of children in order to follow through their reading over a period of several years' (p. 292)

It was not feasible to conduct a study over several years, so the study was limited to a period of two years. It was therefore important to select an age group whose reading habits were in transition. Whitehead had found that there was a decline in reading around the age of 14, so it was decided to concentrate on the age group 13 to 15 year olds.

I shall start by describing the methods which I used, then I will discuss my findings in relation to other recent studies of young people's reading habits. The implications of these findings for fostering pupils' reading habits within schools will be described. The study was based at a research unit funded by the British Library at Sheffield University which is called the 'Centre for Research on User Studies', which I will refer to as CRUS. Before the start of the main study, a preliminary investigation was undertaken. This took the form of group interviews in several Sheffield schools. The interviews were flexible enough for the pupils involved to bring into the discussion their own ideas on what influenced their reading habits. The interviewing schedule for the main study was based on the findings from these interviews.

If the subjects in the main sample were to be interviewed several times at frequent intervals their numbers had to be limited. The disadvantages of the small size of the sample was considered to be balanced by the detail of the information that would be gathered. The main sample consisted of a total of 60 pupils who came from 10 local schools. The schools were chosen with the help of the local education authorities concerned, Sheffield and Derbyshire, and were considered to represent a range of catchment areas, e.g. mainly professional, mixed social class and social priority area. The pupils were randomly selected from the third year group in each school, so the pupils were aged 13 or 14 at the beginning of

the study. Originally, the study intended to monitor the pupils for 2 years, but because of the time taken to gain access to the schools, the study was conducted over 5 rather than 6 terms. I interviewed each pupil individually, once a term, so during the study each pupil was interviewed 5 times. The study took place between January 1979 and July 1980. The first interviews with pupils covered questions on their home background, leisure interests, book and magazine reading and their use of public and school libraries. At these interviews the pupils were provided with notebooks in which to write down the titles of any books which they had read voluntarily. This proved successful as it was mainly the pupils who had not read many books who lost their 'reading diaries'. These diaries were brought to the subsequent interviews and detailed information was collected on the specific books which had been read. At each interview any changes in the pupils' activities were noted.

I shall now describe some of my findings. As the study was small scale and conducted in one geographical area, I can only make tentative generalisations, but by comparing and contrasting my results with similar studies conducted in other parts of the country, it is possible to describe common trends in young people's reading. I shall be referring most frequently to a study by Merril Brown, a lecturer at Middlesex Polytechnic. This study was similar to my own study in that it followed a sample of 40 children over a period of time, 3 years in her case. The participants were slightly younger than those in my study, being 11 at the start of the study.

I found that most young people do read, probably more than teachers think they do. Keith Bardgett refers, in a paper called, 'The Nature of Reluctance', to 'selective vision'. By this he means that reading takes place all the time which most teachers are unaware of, for example, magazines and books based on the mass media are read.

Both Merril Brown and myself only had 1 pupil in our studies who could be described as a complete non-reader. We also both had 4 pupils who were non-book readers during the study. Merril Brown considers that most children have the

will to read. When describing the amount of reading that young people undertake, mean scores of the number of books read are not a very useful indicator. There were enormous differences between pupils in the number of books read. The number of books read in one term ranged from 1 to 80. These differences have been found by other researchers. Vera Southgate studied the personal reading habits of 9 year olds in the 'Extending Beginning Reading' project and found that some children did very much more personal reading than others and this was not necessarily related to reading ability.

During the CRUS study, there was a consistent overall decline in the number of books read from 275 between the first and second interviews to 141 books between the fourth and fifth interviews. Similarly, Merril Brown found that the mean scores of the number of books read decreased each successive year of the survey. I found that although overall the amount of time spent reading decreased, this was not a steady decrease as at various times during the study many of the pupils said they were spending more time reading. 11 of the pupils had not read any books between one or more interviews but read books at other times in the study. In classifying readers, Merril Brown found it necessary to include a category 'reluctant reader with irregular patterns of reading.' I found the decline in the average number of books read per reader was not accompanied by a decrease in the number of pupils who read books. In fact, during the study there were more pupils who started reading books than pupils who stopped reading. It is difficult to tell if the pupils who started reading will continue as none of them were avid readers. By looking in more detail at one of the pupils who started reading, 'Louise', it may shed light on how other teenagers can be encouraged to start reading.

> Louise goes to a disco at a youth club once a week and also to Ambulance cadets. She said she never read books because she could not find the time, although she read 'My Guy' and 'Blue Jeans' regularly. Half way through the study Louise's sister suggested that she read 'A Kind of Loving' by Stan Barstow. Louise enjoyed

this book because the characters were "like people we know, about everyday living". She then borrowed two books from the public library. She said one was called 'Run for your life' which she enjoyed because "there weren't long paragraphs and there was more talking" and the other, 'Kes', she said she enjoyed becuase it was realistic. Louise was still reading at the time of the last interview, although she had only read one book. This book had been recommended and lent to her by her mother.

The reasons given by the pupils for the changes in their reading habits can be grouped as follows:-

- The pressure of examinations and homework
- Summer holidays

  The largest change in reading habits occurred over the summer holidays. Some pupils read more and others read less becuase of the holidays. It seems that the long holiday disrupts the pattern of reading which might not be resumed.

- Other leisure activities

  Some leisure activities are seasonal so pupils may read less during part of the year.

- Family commitments

  These may be temporary for example, mother having a baby or a permanent duty, for example, looking after brothers and sisters which inhibits reading.

- Difficulty in finding suitable books to read or finding books which entice you to read.

- Books being passed round at school encourages reading, which may stop when books are no longer passed around.

The pupils in my study were invloved in a wide range of activities altogether over 70 leisure activities were mentioned. The most frequently mentioned activities throughout the study were team sport, ice-skating, swimming and discos. John Richmond asked a sample of 170, 11 to 14 year old boys in two London schools about their reading habits and other leisure activities. He comments:-

> 'Some of the boys I talked to spoke of a pretty full evening timetable: football training a couple of evenings a week, a fishing club, canoeing, table-tennis at the youth club. Maybe there are times in people's lives when reading takes a back seat.' (p. 26)

Lack of time might be a reason why some people read less often but often in my study it seemed to be a justification given by the pupils. The keen readers seemed to find time for many other activities as well, while some light readers participated in few activities outside home. Cherry is an example of a keen, consistent reader with many other activities.

> Cherry goes to a youth club once a week and spends time gardening, horse-riding and doing gym exercises. During the study she started playing badminton. Cherry read between 8 and 12 books in each period of the study. She read several Catherine Cookson and Agatha Christie books which were recommended by her parents. Cherry also liked reading animal books and read several James Herriott books, 3 books by Joy Adamson and a book of horse stories. Her reading also varied over Richard Gordon books and horror books by James Herbert. Several of the books read had been recommended by friends. Her reading also included many teenage novels, for example, 'Mia', 'Fifteen', 'Across the Barricades' and 'Confessions of a Teenage Baboon'.

I found that the pupils were more likely to be keen book readers if their fathers were engaged in non-manual occupations and both their parents read books. This suggests that reading habits are established before the teenage years. As Merril Brown says:

'It does seem that children who leave the primary school with a firmly established reading habit are less likely to be distracted from reading, by all the pressures and influences at work against this, in the years 11 to 14.' (p. 4)

Difficulty in finding suitable books to read was one of the reasons given by pupils for reading less. This may indicate the need for more guidance from teachers in selecting books which I will discuss later. Some of the pupils were inflexible in their choices of books limiting themselves to one type of book. Matthew was one of those pupils.

Matthew's hobbies were building Air-fix models and collecting coins. During the study he took up war-gaming. Matthew took the magazine 'Wings' for part of the study. His reading reflected his interest in war. Matthew started by reading science fiction and both fiction and non-fiction books on war. He read avidly, having always read more than 10 books between interviews until the last interview. He no longer read any science fiction books after the second interview. At the last interview Matthew said he was reading less because he was getting more choosy about what he read. Most of the books he had read were factual descriptions of weapons and battles, for example, 'German vehicles of the Second World War'.

Magazines were read by a large number of the pupils in the study. At the first interview, 78% of them said they regularly read one or more magazines. I found that the number of magazines read during the study declined slightly but not to the extent that book reading declined. I did not find that magazine reading was a substitute for book reading but rather a supplement to it. This is contrary to Merril Brown, who found that many of her pupils greatly increased their newspaper and magazine reading, while their book reading declined. This may mean that magazine reading reaches a peak around 14. The range of subjects covered by the magazines read by young people is much smaller than the range of books. Probably this reflects availability as John Richmond notes:

'The number of content areas offered by the periodicals available to 11 to 14 year olds is very limited.' (p. 27)

In my study, the boys read magazines about modelling, transport, football, pop music, films, motor cycling, and the second world war. The girls read teenage magazines such as 'My Guy' and 'Jackie'. John Richmond comments:

'At the onset of adolescence and puberty the sexes part company absolutely (or should we say they are forcibly separated) in their periodical reading matter ... If you're fourteen and female, you can read 'My Guy' and 'Jackie'. If you're fourteen and male, you've got 'Shoot' and 'Spider Man'.' (p. 28)

There is a need for magazines in the usual popular format which present young people as 'multi-dimensional' human beings. Despite my reservations about the magazines currently available for young people, I do not think they should be rejected altogether by school libraries as this widens the gap further between youth and school culture. Keith Bardgett comments that we are living in a disposable society where ephemeral things are becoming more important, so they should be taken more seriously by teachers.

It is difficult to describe the type of books that are read by the pupils in my study as the range was so great making generalisation impossible. This was also found by the other researchers. Merril Brown says that the diversity of taste and interests was immense. John Richmond says the books read were:

'A broad mixture, which more or less defies analysis or categorization ... There is obviously a very low level of concensus about what books are read ... Leisure reading seems to be a pretty solitary and idiosyncratic business.' (p. 26)

Most of the books read by the pupils in my study were adult books. Merril Brown found that the need and wish to read adult fiction began at 10+ and grew in intensity. Children were willing to tackle reading matter far beyond their reading levels in order to sample adult fiction. In order to comment on the most popular books, I made a list of all books read by more than 1 pupil during the study. This consisted of a list of 50 books. The most popular book was James Herriott's 'Vet in Harness' which had been read by 8 pupils. The following authors appeared more than once on the list:- James Herriott, Ian Fleming, Isaac Asimov, James Herbert and Tolkein. Other types of books on the list are animal books, humorous books, mysteries, science fiction, classical novels, and

teenage novels. More than half the books on the list have some link with the mass media. Either the book is based on a television show or the book has been televised or made into a film. A survey carried out by the National Foundation for Educational Research involving 14,000 pupils found that two-thirds of the children enjoyed reading books connected with television shows. Merril Brown considers the media is a major influence on the children's choice of books.

The 3 main sources of books were buying them (27% of books read) borrowing from a public library (25%) and borrowing from friends or family (24%). Only 11% of the books had been borrowed from a school library, which seems to indicate that school libraries are not catering for young people's leisure reading needs. John Richmond notes a similar finding when he says:

> 'Out of school sources, that is public libraries, bookshops, parents, brothers and sisters are more important in all 4 first and second year classes than school, as providers of leisure reading.' (p.26)

In my study, a third of all the books bought came from W.H. Smith. Besides bookshops, other places where books were bought included jumble sales, book clubs, newsagents, Boots, Woolworths, a market, a toyshop, a cafe and a motorway service station. The popularity of buying books suggests that it is worthwhile for schools to encourage an outlet for the sale of books in schools. Some pupils said they had read books because they had been readily available. For example, one pupil said, "I felt like a change and it was convenient", and another pupil said, "it was lying around at home."

The 5 most common reasons given for choosing a book in order of frequency were:

1. A book by the same author had previously been read;
2. The book was recommended;
3. The influence of mass media;
4. The pupil was looking for a particular type of book;
5. The pupil was attracted by the picture and/or writing on the cover.

A study conducted in Hull by Vera Wyse to ascertain the reasons why 8 and 9 year olds did not complete a book found a different ordering of reasons for choice.

She found attraction of the cover and some form of familiarity were the main reasons for initial choice. Literary criteria, for example, 'the words, the first page or liking for the author', came low down in her list. I found that 56, that is 8% of the books read were not enjoyed. One of the reasons why books might not be enjoyed is that the cover is more enticing than the contents. Merril Brown found that sometimes attractive covers were misleading or publishers' descriptions inaccurate. Vera Wyse found that of the 22 children who chose a book because they liked the cover, all but one child found it to be unlike what they expected. Vera Southgate found that very few first year juniors selected story books at the appropriate level of difficulty. This again suggests the need for more gudiance in selecting appropriate books.

I shall now go on to discuss the implications that these findings might have for the use of books in schools. As we have seen, young people <u>are</u> willing to read books. Keith Bardgett considers that reluctance to read often means a reluctance to read English Literature. He suggests that teachers should be more concerned with the quality of response rather than the quality of literature. He found that there tends to be an 'Inverse Oliver Syndrome' in schools, where if classics are not successful, edited classics are used or extracts from classics. It is important that fiction is not used in schools in a way that may alienate young people. Geoff Fox says that children have come to see fiction as a preface to other work, which may reduce their enjoyment of it. The same sentiment is expressed by John Richmond as follows:-

> 'I would say that secondary schools often communicate an attitude to reading which is unlikely to help the children see the process as pleasurable, leisured and enlightening ... The reading process is associated in children's minds with the requirement of immediate analysis and response. That's not a requirement placed on most adult readers most of the time.' (p. 26)

The report by N.F.E.R. found that talking about books was a popular follow-up to a reading session but writing about them was cordially detested by around two-thirds of the pupils. Vera Southgate recommends providing un-interrupted periods of time when the whole class will be engaged in the silent reading of books of their own choice. Some schools have a period of time each week where

everyone in the school is reading a book of their own choice.

The CRUS study found that leisure reading was more prevalent among the pupils who attended schools which encouraged leisure reading. The presence of class libraries, a bookshop or club, silent reading lessons, a qualified librarian and library periods were regarded as indicators of an encouraging attitude to reading. Vera Southgate found that the average number of story books read per year by children in different classes showed wide divergences, which would seem to indicate that encouragement of personal reading by the teacher is a vital factor. I found that personal recommendation was one of the main motivations for reading specific books. Also the pupils who gave up reading books because they could not find any more suitable ones to read seems to show a need for guidance. Despite the influence that teachers can have on young people's reading, most of the researchers found a lack of guidance being given. Merril Brown found that children are likely to go on reading more books where there is an interested adult whether in home or school or both. Where the home provides no models and no guidance in reading, the influence of the English teacher is crucial. Vera Wyse found that children only received sparse guidance on choosing books effectively. She suggests that teachers keep leisure reading profiles of their pupils. John Richmond also emphasises the importance of teachers knowing what their pupils read and suggests they build up lateral connections between individuals with similar interests. Many teachers are aware that they lack knowledge of suitable modern fiction for children but say it is difficult to keep up to date when their time is so limited. Vera Wyse considers that maybe too much is expected from teachers in this area. If teachers are to provide more guidance over leisure reading, they need more free time, more help from advisers and the provision of suitable courses.

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